

Love on the Slopes by theamiableanachronism

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Summary:

It was day five of their family vacation but this morning it had felt like day fifty. The continental breakfast had been just as bland and colorless as the past four days. Mom and Dad were loudly not speaking as usual, Nancy was angry at Mom for something, and Holly was blissfully unaware as only a three year old could be. If Mike hadn't been resting his elbows on the table, he might have fallen facefirst into his plate of eggs just for something to do.

But then he saw her.

Love on the Slopes

Author's Note:

So I wrote this in response to a prompt request fully intending for it to be a drabble but it ran away with me and became an AU of definitely-not-a-drabble proportions. Hope you enjoy!

“I’m sorry, son, but I just have to ask: what happened out there?”

The doctor looked at Mike sympathetically, though not without amusement, over the top of his glasses, pen poised over his clipboard.

Mike squinted at him through his one unblackened eye. There was no way he was going to tell him exactly why he’d skied directly into a tree, especially not with his mother in the room. She would only start asking questions he didn’t know how to answer. Like why he’d been so distracted by a girl he hadn’t even known existed before breakfast. He didn’t know himself.

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But then he saw her. A vision in a sweatshirt and overalls bounding down the stairs, curls flying, brown eyes- they had to be the darkest he’d ever seen- bright with the characteristic gleam of someone who’d just arrived and was as yet unaware of the unending boredom that was Lakewood Lodge. With a furtive look over her shoulder, she skipped the bottom step and he could have sworn she floated the last couple inches to the floor. She looked around the dining room and his heart stopped as her eyes met his own. She stopped, looking just as surprised as he felt. He smiled sheepishly, something overriding his normal urge to avoid any and all eye contact with girls. Slowly, her lips started to curve up into a smile and his heart started beating

again only to leap into his throat when a sharp voice came down the stairs and she turned to look up the stairs at the biggest man Mike had ever seen. The man was giving her the same look Mike's mom gave him whenever he tried to negotiate a later bedtime. She looked back, all innocence, until he reached the bottom of the stairs. He said something too quiet for Mike to hear and she huffed defiantly before saying something back that made the man's shoulders start to quake—he was laughing. He wrapped her head in the crook of his arm, ruffling her hair with his free hand before clasping her shoulders and directing her into the dining room. They were heading in Mike's direction and from the way his stomach flipped, he was suddenly thankful he hadn't actually eaten any of his breakfast yet. He looked down at his plate, trying to look casual by pushing the eggs around with his fork. It looked like they were going to pass his table by completely, but at the last second he looked up and she was looking back at him, a curious smile on her face. His hand jerked, flipping his fork out of his hand with so much force it bounced off his plate and tumbled onto the floor. He felt his face flush red as his Mom sighed an exasperated "Mike!"

"Sorry," he mumbled, ducking under the table to grab his fork. He looked out past the legs of Holly's high chair, searching the tables and finally found the girl and her dad in line for breakfast across the room. Her dad leaned down and said something to her and she laughed. He couldn't help but stare.

"Mike, what are you doing down there?"

Nancy's voice burst the bubble and he startled, bumping his head on the underside of the table. He winced and rubbed his head, crawling out and clambering up onto his chair. His family was staring at him, even Dad, which meant he must have been pretty conspicuous.

"Sorry," he said again. Mom frowned.

"Are you okay?" she asked, squinting suspiciously.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he sighed, wiping off his fork with a napkin.

She stared at him for another moment before shaking her head with a sigh and returning to feeding Holly. Mike looked over his shoulder

and found the girl and her dad just sliding into a booth with their plates. She had a stack of what must have been at least five waffles on her plate. Just waffles. He smiled in spite of himself and turned back to his eggs.

That was this morning. They must have missed each other after breakfast because he didn't see her again until they were on the slopes. She was coming out of one of the lifts about a hundred feet away in a bright blue snowsuit and he was getting ready to head down the hill. He wasn't the best skier, wasn't the best at anything athletic really, but he could at least keep his footing and make it to the bottom of a hill while avoiding most obstacles. He'd seen the tree from the top of the hill, confident he'd be able to maneuver around it once he was up on it, but just before he started to swerve, he saw her off to his right, sailing down the slopes. Maybe it was the blue of her snowsuit bright against the white snow that caught his eye, or maybe it was the way her curls had slipped out from under her cap and were gracefully whipping around her face, or maybe it was the determined smile on her lips that made him completely forget the tree until he'd collided with it.

So here he was in the clinic with the doctor laughing at him and his black eye and twisted ankle and remarkable lack of broken bones.

"I dunno," he shrugged, finally answering the doctor's question.

The doctor chuckled and pushed his glasses back up. "Did he eat anything this morning?"

Mom nodded. "Yes."

"He been acting unusually?"

She started to shake her head then paused to look at Mike and he knew she was thinking of breakfast. But she said, "No."

The doctor nodded and made a note on his clipboard before letting it fall to his side with a clap. "Okay then, sounds like just your everyday case of distraction. Keep your eye on the ball from now on,

okay, son?" He winked jovially and clapped Mike on the shoulder with a chuckle. Mike nodded with a weak smile, squashing the urge to roll his eyes.

On the way back to the waiting room, he could feel Mom just waiting to ask him about breakfast. She finally did just in front of the door that led back into the waiting room.

"Are you feeling all right, Mike?"

He steadied himself on his crutches and shrugged. "Well- yeah, I guess."

"Because you WERE acting funny today at breakfast."

"I just dropped a fork, Mom."

"I just want to make sure you're all right."

"I'm fine, Mom. Really."

She frowned, her eyes scanning his face until she sighed, her shoulders rising and falling. "All right. Here." She pushed open the door and let him go through. Dad, Nancy, and Holly were waiting against the far wall. Nancy looked from his face to his ankle, her mouth agape. He shrugged and looked over his shoulder at Mom who smiled and patted him comfortingly on the shoulder.

But then his mouth fell open.

On the opposite side of the room was the girl from breakfast.

Her dad was with her, looking gruff and steely, arms folded across his chest, a completely different man from the one who'd given his daughter a noogie that morning. They were both still in their ski gear and he suddenly wondered how long they'd been here. He frowned. WHY were they here? His stomach dropped for a second thinking maybe she was hurt somehow, but the way she was smiling sympathetically at him, she wasn't the patient they were here for. He blushed again and started to smile back when his Mom suddenly spoke.

“Jim?”

She was looking at the girl's dad, whose gruffness immediately melted into a smile that changed the shape of his whole face, revealing the hair-ruffling dad from this morning.

“Karen?”

He stood up and met Mom halfway, shaking her outstretched hand. “Jim Hopper, of all the places to run into you! What are you doing up here?”

Jim laughed and shrugged. “Just a day trip.”

“I haven't seen you in years!”

“Yeah, I've been working up in Chicago.”

“What are you doing back in Indiana?” She covered her mouth. “Are you coming back to Hawkins?”

He chuckled again. “You got me. Yeah, I'm going to be working down at the station.”

Mom folded her arms, impressed. “Really? The station, wow.”

“He's going to be the Chief of Police, you can tell people that, Dad.” The girl had appeared at his side. Jim rolled his eyes before hugging her to his side.

“Yes, I'm going to be the Chief of Police, thank you. This is my daughter, Ellie,” he added with a grin.

“El for short,” she said with a pointed look at her father.

“Hi, El,” Mom said with a smile. “I knew your dad back at Hawkins High. What's it been, fifteen years?”

Jim nodded. “Been a long time, yeah.”

“So. Chief of Police? Very nice. You're moving up in the world.”

Jim shrugged and chuckled. “Guess so.”

“Well, this is my son, Mike, and that’s Nancy over there with Holly. And then that’s Ted.”

“Hey Mike,” Jim said with a nod before waving to the others who were watching curiously from across the room.

“Hi Mike,” El said with a smile. He tried to smile back but it turned into a wince, his black eye stinging from the strain. She chuckled sadly and he managed a halfway smile. Somewhere distant, Jim and his Mom were talking about his work as a detective in Chicago, but he wasn’t paying attention; he couldn’t bring himself to look away from El. It was like she had some kind of tractor beam when she was smiling and it lit up her whole face- were her eyes actually sparkling?- and he suddenly realized that he wasn’t breathing. He steadied himself on his crutches at the same moment that a skier on a stretcher was wheeled in, followed by a clamoring crowd. He must have twisted one of the crutches funny as he turned to look because he suddenly started to fall. He heard Mom call his name and braced himself for the impact, but just before he hit the ground, he stopped, like he was paused. He looked up and saw El frowning and staring at him intently. It only lasted for a second and he landed softly on the ground. He looked up just in time to see El swipe a gloved hand under her nose. Mom was asking him if he was all right but all he could do was nod absently, all his attention trained on the look being exchanged between El and Jim. It was the same look he’d given her coming down the stairs that morning. Now he KNEW she’d been floating. The only question was how?

The rest of his family had managed to thread through the crowd and now they’d joined Mom in frantically asking if he was okay. Which he was, thanks to El, who looked suddenly sheepish. How had she done it? He couldn’t ask her anything in front of all these people, but he was determined to get some answers once they could talk without people listening in.

They made their way out of the waiting room and he ended up next to El. Mom was trying to persuade Jim to come to dinner tonight with El, and Nancy was busy minding Holly while trying not to laugh at how Dad was not-so-subtly mirroring Jim’s stance while he talked with Mom, so no one was paying attention to Mike and El’s whispered conversation.

“How did you do that?”

“I’m not supposed to do it in public,” she said with a pointed look at her dad.

“But how are you doing it at all?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she whispered.

They parted ways and Mike spent the next few hours with ice on his ankle contemplating all the different ways someone could make themselves or another person float. It was only something he’d seen in comic books and movies. It wasn’t real, he’d thought, but El was real so it HAD to be real. Unless he’d dreamed all of this up and none of this was real. He almost bruised his arm pinching himself, so he knew he was awake. That still didn’t rule out hallucinations, since Mom hadn’t seemed to notice when he floated even though she was right next to him, but he wouldn’t know for sure until he talked to El.

They met in the dining room at the same table where they’d eaten breakfast. This time, Mike kept a firm grasp on his fork and tried not to spend the entire time smiling at El across the table, though it was hard when she was spending most of the time smiling at HIM. There wasn’t much time to talk since when Mom wasn’t talking to Jim, Dad was grilling him about his history in Hawkins. It was a relief when Mom asked Mike to take Holly to the dessert table and even more so when El showed up behind him.

“Hi,” he said, the first word that had passed between them since the waiting room.

“Hi,” she said, smiling that smile again, wincing when she looked at his eye.

“Looks painful.”

He shrugged, adjusting Holly in his arms. “It’s okay.”

“Did you really crash into a tree?”

He cleared his throat. "Yeah," he said, busying himself looking at the cookie platter that Holly had already passed up in favor of the ice cream machine she was pointing at wildly while threatening to wriggle out of his arms.

"How did THAT happen?" El asked.

"Sun in my eyes," he mumbled.

"Ah." She was smiling again, almost knowingly. Holly saved him from getting caught in her tractor beam again by starting to whine and point even harder at the people walking away with bowls of ice cream. He sighed and made his way to the machine, putting Holly down and grabbing a bowl with the hand not already holding hers. He filled her bowl with ice cream and picked her up again, slowly making his way back to the table.

"So," he said in a low voice. "How-

"How did I make you float earlier?"

"Yeah."

El looked around furtively then down at the plate of cookies she'd gathered. "I've always been able to do it. Even before Jim."

"Before Jim?"

She nodded.

He stopped walking. "Jim isn't your dad?"

"No."

"Okay. Well... who is? I mean, where are your parents?"

El shrugged, suddenly somber. "I don't know."

Mike paused, searching for the right words. "So...you're adopted?"

El nodded.

"Where were you before Jim?"

A shadow crossed her face. "Bad place," she said quietly, as though saying the words was as bad as the memories.

He almost didn't say anything, but something rankled in him, something angry, and the words burst out anyway. "They hurt you?" he said in a hushed voice.

She looked away and guilt kicked him in the gut. "I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing to say. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

She looked back at him, her eyes dark with memories, and nodded. "They were bad people." She paused, each word carrying the weight of a lifetime of pain. "But I have Jim now." She smiled softly and looked back toward the table. Mike followed her gaze and saw Jim watching them. Mike smiled at him and watched the man relax back into conversation with his parents.

"We should probably go back," he said.

El nodded and they started walking again.

"Thanks for telling me," Mike said. "I'm sorry if it, you know, brought up... bad memories. I didn't mean to- "

"Mike. It's okay."

He watched her face as they walked, in disbelief that anyone would ever even try to hurt someone like her. He barely even knew her and it made his blood boil. He swallowed all his questions about what in her life had led her there, whether it had anything to do with her powers, how she'd found Jim. Maybe he'd know someday. Maybe he never would. He didn't care. All that mattered was that she was here and safe now. He cleared his throat, adjusting Holly in his arms.

"Thanks for saving me back there."

El grinned. "You already had a black eye. I couldn't let you hurt yourself again."

Mike smiled, not even caring that it hurt his eye.

“So you’re moving to Hawkins?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Maybe we’ll be neighbors.”

“I’d like that,” she said with a grin.

He smiled. “Me too.”